

Haiti: Background to the 1991 Overthrow of President Aristide

October 22, 1993

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

93-931

Summary

The overthrow of Haiti's first democratically elected president in September 1991 propelled Haiti into its worst crisis since popular protests brought down the 29-year dictatorship of the Duvalier family in 1986. Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected President of Haiti in a landslide victory on December 16, 1990, in what was widely heralded as the first free and fair election in the country's 186-year history. A Catholic priest of the radical left, he was inaugurated on February 7, 1991, and overthrown by the military on September 30.

Politics in Haiti have been generally violent and authoritarian, ever since Haiti became an independent republic in 1804. The legacy of despotic rulers has been difficult to overcome.

The United States intervened in Haiti in 1915 to stop civil strife and prevent Germany from establishing a foothold. The U.S. Marines occupied Haiti until 1934, overseeing public works, tax collection, treasury management, and the development of a native Haitian Constabulary which was Haiti's first professional military force. While many of these contributions were welcomed and much needed, many Haitians deeply resented the U.S. presence as an affront to Haitian sovereignty.

From 1957 through 1986, Francois Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude rule Haiti for nearly 30 years, leaving behind a legacy of repression and corruption. After Duvalier's ouster in 1986, a series of short-lived governments, most military-dominated, ruled through 1990.

This report provides background information on the violent and authoritarian traditions that have characterized Haiti's political dynamics since Haiti attained independence in 1804. It examines Haiti's difficult path toward democracy after the fall of the Duvalier regime, from numerous short-lived governments until the election of Aristide in December 1990. Finally, the report also briefly surveys Aristide's rule from February 1991 until his subsequent overthrow by the Haitian military 8 months later, in September 1991.

Contents

Violent and Authoritarian Traditions	1
Long-Standing Racial Conflict.....	1
U.S. Occupation of Haiti and the Duvalier Legacy.....	1
Difficult Path Towards Democracy	2
A New Constitution Thwarted by Military-Dominated Governments	2
Civilian-Appointed Interim Government	3
Election and Overthrow of the Aristide Government.....	3
Aristide's Human Rights Record	4
Role of the Military in the Democratic Process	6

Appendixes

Appendix. A Brief Statistical Profile	7
---	---

Contacts

Author Information.....	7
-------------------------	---

Violent and Authoritarian Traditions

Politics in Haiti have been generally violent and authoritarian, ever since Haiti became an independent republic in 1804, when African-descended slaves revolted against their French colonial masters. Between the end of the rule of Toussaint Louverture (leader of the slave rebellion) in 1803, and Francois Duvalier, founder of the 30-year dictatorship that fell in 1986—both of whom declared themselves president for life—were some 30 other despotic rulers. This legacy would appear difficult to overcome. In addition, most of the traditional centers of power in Haiti, such as the military, the Catholic and Protestant churches, the business sector, and the traditional elite, find democratic reformist ideas threatening in the Haitian context. The government apparatus is still staffed principally by Duvalierist appointees, many of whom have resisted change during the numerous post-Duvalier governments and will most likely continue to do so.

Long-Standing Racial Conflict

Haitian history is marked by conflict between two racial groups: the mulatto elite and the majority blacks. The vast majority of Haitians are black, poor, illiterate peasants. The mulattos established their economic power and elite status principally by controlling the business sector. Both groups enjoyed periods of political dominance. Black rulers generally emphasized Haiti's African roots and traditions, including the African-based folk religion, voodoo. The mulatto elite emphasized a European, Catholic tradition. Because of their education, mulattos held some government positions even during black rule.

Race relations have improved in recent years: the once disdained Creole dialect used by the majority is now an official language spoken by all Haitians; interracial marriages are common; and the government is no longer as dominated by mulattoes. But recent political events have again heightened racial and class tensions within Haiti. The poor black majority's only access to power has been through public protests, when tolerated, and the recent elections. The mulatto elite wields most of the economic and political power in Haiti, and generally resists dramatic changes toward a redistribution of wealth and privilege to improve the lot of the poor majority.

U.S. Occupation of Haiti and the Duvalier Legacy

For much of this century, Haitian history was marked by occupation government or the authoritarian Duvalier regime. The United States intervened in Haiti in 1915 to stop civil strife and prevent Germany from establishing a foothold there. By mid-August, 1915, there were more than 2,000 U.S. Marines in Haiti.¹ The Marines stayed until 1934, overseeing public works, tax collection, treasury management, and the development of a native Haitian Constabulary which was Haiti's first professional military force. Some of these contributions were welcome and much needed. But the U.S. presence was also deeply resented as an affront to Haitian sovereignty. Many Haitians charged the United States with discriminating against blacks by placing mulattoes in positions of power.

By 1932, the U.S. withdrawal from Haiti was well underway during the Administration of Herbert Hoover. Because of growing concerns about the effects of the occupation, President Hoover had appointed a commission 1930 to study the U.S. involvement in Haiti. The

¹ Logan, Rayford W. *Challenge and Response in Internal Conflict*. Washington: Center for Research in Social Systems. September 1968. p. 36.

commission concluded that while the occupation had brought about material improvements to Haiti, the U.S. occupation also excluded Haitians from positions of real authority in the government and the constabulary. Under President Franklin Roosevelt, a disengagement agreement was signed in August 1933, and the last contingent of U.S. Marines left Haiti in August 1934.²

Francois Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude ruled Haiti for nearly 30 years, leaving behind a legacy of repression and corruption. Francois, or “Papa Doc,” Duvalier became President in 1957 through elections marred by numerous irregularities. Although Duvalier originally ran on a platform calling for political liberty and social reform, within a year he had established himself as a dictator. Under his rule, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, and unexplained deaths became commonplace. The Duvaliers’ private militia, the Tontons Macoutes, carried out most of this repression. The Macoutes, Creole for “bogeymen,” were loosely organized armed gangs enlisted by the Duvaliers to eliminate opposition to their rule through violence and extortion. The Macoutes also served to counterbalance the army’s power, which the Duvaliers kept in check to prevent military coups.³ In 1964, the elder Duvalier had the constitution amended to make himself president-for-life. In 1971, three months before his death, he had it amended again so that he could name his 19-year-old son Jean-Claude president-for-life.

In the 1980s, “Baby Doc” Duvalier’s marriage to a prominent mulatto and their opulent lifestyle stirred up much resentment among the poor black majority who lived in absolute poverty. In addition, fiscal corruption was rampant and widely recognized in Jean-Claude’s government. As popular dissatisfaction rose, his regime grew increasingly repressive. In the face of massive popular demonstrations and pressure from abroad, Jean-Claude Duvalier fled the country for France on February 7, 1986. The United States encouraged and helped arrange his departure.

Difficult Path Towards Democracy

A New Constitution Thwarted by Military-Dominated Governments

Aristide’s 1991 ouster ushered in the seventh government in the five and one-half years since the young Duvalier’s departure. The first interim government was a 6-man, military-dominated National Council of Government (CNG) that disbanded the Tontons Macoutes and allowed the drafting of a new constitution. The new constitution, which over 99 percent of Haitian voters reportedly approved in a plebiscite, guaranteed personal liberties; distributed power among a president, a Prime Minister, and two legislative houses; and transferred the police to the department of justice. It also created an independent electoral council to oversee elections leading to the inauguration of a civilian government in February 1988. Members of the armed forces and anyone closely associated with the Duvalier family dictatorship were barred from running for office. But Duvalierists, in collaboration with the army, thwarted the November 1987 elections by mounting a violent campaign that culminated in the killing of dozens of voters on election day; as a result of the violence, the elections were suspended.

In January 1988, the CNG ran its own elections, widely viewed as rigged in favor of Leslie Manigat, a long-exiled academic. But less than 6 months later, on June 20, 1988, Manigat was

² Haggerty, Richard A. ed. *Dominican Republic and Haiti*, country studies. Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991. pp. 224-226.

³ See Haggerty. pp. 232-234.

ousted in a military coup when he tried to replace officials and reform the government. Lt. General Henri Namphy, CNG president and close friend of Papa Doc's, seized power. During the 31 months that Namphy ran the government (February 1986 to September 1988), human rights violations increased, with numerous political killings. Namphy was succeeded by Lt. Gen. Prosper Avril, who promised a transition to democracy. But under Avril's regime, human rights continued to be routinely violated, as reported by the U.S. State Department, human rights groups, and others. Violent popular protests forced Avril to resign after 18 months.

Civilian-Appointed Interim Government

As a result, in March 1990, a civilian government was appointed with the mandate of holding elections as soon as possible. A coalition of political and civic organizations selected Ertha Pascal-Trouillot, the only woman on the Supreme Court, as provisional President. A State Council was established with the objective of giving policy guidance to the executive branch. The Council severed relations with the executive branch, however, after the executive branch failed to consult the Council or to take action against political violence. President Trouillot headed what was generally considered a weak civilian government, unable or unwilling to effectively control the military. She established and cooperated with an independent electoral council that organized successful elections at the end of the year.

Election and Overthrow of the Aristide Government⁴

Hopes that Haiti would leave behind its authoritarian past were raised on December 16, 1990, when Haitians elected a President, national legislators, and municipal officials. Despite security concerns and lack of a democratic tradition, voter turnout was estimated to be 70 percent on election day, and international observers declared the elections generally free and fair. The elections were in part the result of a strong democratic movement that had emerged in the late 1980s in support of an elected government that would establish order in a non-repressive manner. The democratic movement encompassed many elements of Haitian society, including political parties as well as peasant, labor, human rights, and professional organizations. Many observers also credited the success and relatively peaceful nature of the elections to the heavy presence of international observers, whose presence the government of Haiti had requested, and to the economic and material support provided by many nations and international organizations.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected President with 67.5 percent of the vote, and was inaugurated on the fifth anniversary of the collapse of the Duvalier dictatorship. A 37-year-old populist Roman Catholic priest, he was the most controversial of 11 candidates ruled eligible to run by the independent Provisional Electoral Council (CEP). To his supporters, Aristide is a martyr, willing to risk his life to defend the poor. An advocate of "liberation theology," Aristide spoke out against Duvalier and the military rulers who followed him. In September 1988, an armed group attacked and burned Aristide's church, killing 13 and wounding 70; surrounded by his parishioners, Aristide escaped unharmed. To his detractors, Aristide is a potentially dangerous demagogue, whose inflammatory oratory they say encourages the rampages, known as *dechoukaj*, or "uprooting" in Creole, in which suspected Tontons Macoutes are attacked or killed by angry mobs. Aristide reportedly denies that his book, *100 Verses of Dechoukaj*, condones violence. Nonetheless, the Salesian religious order expelled him for preaching politics from the pulpit, including what the order called "class struggle."

⁴ This section draws from various *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles. For specific details see Facts on File 1990 and 1991.

When Aristide became a candidate, he toned down his revolutionary and anti-U.S. rhetoric. Aristide previously opposed democratic elections in Haiti, arguing that free and fair elections were impossible as long as Duvalierists still had a hold on economic and political power. Nonetheless, he joined the race in response to former Tontons Macoutes chief Roger Lafontant's potential candidacy.

Lafontant was ruled ineligible to run for the presidency, and in early January 1991, he led an attempted coup against President Trouillot in an effort to prevent Aristide, whom he called an "ultra-communist," from taking office on February 7, 1991. Lafontant seized the national palace and tried to declare martial law. Instead, the army arrested Lafontant and promised to have him tried in the civilian courts. The popular celebration that followed turned violent as crowds hunted down and lynched dozens of suspected Macoutes. Mobs also burned down the 220-year old cathedral, in apparent retaliation for a homily by the Archbishop—whose relations with Aristide have long been tense—that warned of a coming "regime of authoritarian politics." Many foreign diplomats criticized Aristide for not condemning the street violence quickly or forcefully enough.

President Aristide was faced with some of the most serious and persistent social, economic, and political problems in the western hemisphere. After 8 months in office, Aristide had received mixed reviews. He was credited with curbing crime in the capital, reducing the number of employees in bloated state enterprises, and taking actions to bring the military under civilian control. But some observers questioned the new government's commitment to democracy. Neither Aristide nor his Prime Minister belonged to a political party, and leaders of other political parties criticized him for not reaching out and establishing a spirit of cooperation among the democratic elements. Many legislators, including some from Aristide's own coalition, protested the President's appointment of Supreme Court judges and ambassadors without consulting the Senate as required by the constitution. Aristide later agreed to consult the legislature, but relations between the two branches remained strained.

Aristide was also criticized for his attitude toward the judicial system. Lafontant was tried in July 1991 for his role in the failed January coup attempt. Aristide called for a life sentence—which Lafontant received—although the constitution limited sentences to 15 years. Aristide declared the next day a national holiday. Many observers expressed concern over the trial, saying it differed little from trials under the Duvaliers: it lasted for over 20 consecutive hours, important witnesses were not called, and the court appointed five lawyer trainees to defend Lafontant because even his own lawyer felt it too dangerous to defend him.

Initially criticized for not having a clear plan, the Aristide government in July 1991 presented a macroeconomic reform and public sector investment plan to representatives of several nations and international lending institutions, who lauded the plan and pledged \$440 million in FY1992 aid. Most of that aid was suspended because of the coup that overthrew Aristide's government on September 30, 1991.

Aristide's Human Rights Record

In the area of respect for human rights, President Aristide also had mixed reviews. He was criticized for appearing to condone mob violence, but was also credited with significantly reducing human rights violations while he was in office.

Some observers believe that as President, Aristide helped to polarize the situation in Haiti by refusing to condemn violent acts of retribution, and holding out the threat of mob violence against those who disagreed with him. For example, Aristide refused to condemn the practice of "pere lebrun", or burning someone to death with a "necklace" consisting of a gasoline-soaked auto tire. After the former head of the Tontons Macoutes was sentenced to life in prison, Aristide gave a

speech in which he noted that without popular pressure and the threat of “pere lebrun” in front of the courthouse, the life sentence would not have been chosen.

Moreover, in a September 27, 1991 speech, Aristide appeared to threaten former Tontons Macoutes with “pere lebrun.” Aristide reportedly said, “You are watching all macoute activities throughout the country. We are watching and praying. We are watching and praying. If we catch one, do not fail to give him what he deserves. What a nice tool! What a nice instrument! What a nice device! It is a pretty one. It is elegant, attractive, splendorous, graceful, and dazzling. It smells good. Wherever you go, you feel like smelling it. It is provided for by the Constitution, which bans macoutes from the political scene.”⁵ In exile Aristide condemned the practice of necklacing.⁶

Observers contend that in the speech Aristide also threatened the bourgeoisie for not having helped his government enough.⁷ Some saw the speech as another factor leading to his overthrow just days later, and maintain that members of the bourgeoisie were financially supporting the coup leaders.

In a report on the Aristide government’s human rights record, Americas Watch and two other human rights groups wrote:

It is unfortunate but understandable that Aristide’s speeches in support of Pere Lebrun have overshadowed other speeches in which he advocated lawful redress for abuse....President Aristide had a duty to refrain from any statement that could be understood to support Pere Lebrun, and to speak out firmly and consistently against this barbaric practice. His failure to fulfill this duty is a serious blemish on his human rights record.⁸

The report also reflected the views of many in the international community when it recognized President Aristide as the “sole legitimate Haitian head of state,” elected with a two-thirds majority, an unusual mandate in the hemisphere. The report further stated: “While we recognize the need to correct the human rights shortcomings of the Aristide government ... we believe firmly that these failings cannot be used to justify committing yet a further, serious human rights violation by depriving the Haitian people of the right to elect their government.”⁹

Most human rights monitors credit the Aristide government with being the first Haitian government to address the need to improve respect for human rights, and the needs of the poor majority. They assert that progress made during his term was undone by the military regime that followed. Most sources credit Aristide with creating a much greater sense of security in Haiti than there had been in years. He greatly reduced common crime in the city; the removal of the “chefs de sections,” or sheriffs, many of whom had ruled rural Haiti through extortion and violence for decades, brought greater security to the countryside as well. According to the State Department human rights reports for 1991 and 1992, there were no reports of disappearances during Aristide’s term, and dozens in the months following the coup. The number of political killings also rose dramatically after Aristide was ousted.

⁵ Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Daily Report, Latin America. Aristide Address 27 Sep After Visit to UN. October 7, 1991, pp. 18-19.

⁶ Alexander Watson, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs at a briefing for the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs. October 20, 1993.

⁷ Eaton, William. “Haitian Coup Leader Meets OAS Delegates.” *Los Angeles Times*. October 6, 1991. p. A15

⁸ *Haiti: The Aristide Government’s Human Rights Record*. Americas Watch, The National Coalition for Haitian Refugees and Caribbean Rights. Nov. 1, 1991.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

The September 1991 coup began just four days after Aristide addressed the United Nations, an event he reportedly said marked the end of Haiti's dark past of dictatorship. The State Department estimated coup-related deaths at 300-500, while Amnesty International estimated them to number over 1,500.

Role of the Military in the Democratic Process

Under the military-dominated interim governments, the Haitian army frequently impeded the democratic process. After the departure of the last military dictator in March 1990, however, some observers believed there had been a transformation of the army to one supportive of democracy. Throughout the 1990 electoral process, the 7,000-man army proved itself capable of establishing and maintaining order. Several factors accounted for the change, including attrition of anti-democratic elements with the downfall of the various interim governments; the army's inability to form a viable government; a new generation of officers interested in reform and professionalization of the armed forces; and growing domestic and international pressure for a civilian democracy. Initially, the army accepted Aristide's assertion of authority, including his purge of the Haitian army high command. Brig. General Cedras, who oversaw security for the December elections, was reportedly a reluctant participant in the coup. But as its spokesman, he said Aristide was ousted for "meddling in army affairs." Some analysts argue the army does not want to relinquish control so that it can continue to profit from contraband-and narcotics-trafficking.

In its attempts to implement provisions of the Haitian constitution that impose civilian authority over the military, the Aristide government met significant army resistance. For example, the constitution calls for the separation of the police from the army, with the police under the command of the Ministry of Justice. The law also mandates that cases involving military abuses against civilians be tried in civilian courts, not by the military. The military had resisted previous efforts to execute those laws. No military personnel were prosecuted for human rights abuses under any of the interim governments. When he was overthrown, Aristide was opening an attack on corruption, pressing reforms in the army, and creating a civilian police force.

The military's trend toward improved human rights under the Aristide government was reversed after the coup, according to the State Department's 1991 human rights report. That and other human rights reports stated that the military used violence to intimidate political opposition, popular organizations, the urban poor, and the media.¹⁰

During the numerous interim governments as well as under Aristide's rule, many former members of the army and the Tontons Macoutes still had weapons and terrorized the populace. Dealing in contraband, robbery, and extortion, they profited from insecurity and chaos. None of the interim governments prosecuted perpetrators of past human rights violations or sent consistent signals that Macoute violence would not be tolerated. The public sometimes took matters into its own hands, carrying out "popular justice" or summary public executions of suspected Macoutes. The Aristide government has been charged with appearing to condone such tactics, but was also credited with lowering the crime rate in the capital, and with detaining many "terrorists". After Aristide's ouster, there was a resurgence of Tontons Macoutes activity.¹¹

¹⁰ For example, see Americas Watch. *Return to the Darkest Days: Human Rights in Haiti Since the Coup*. December 1991; Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. *Haiti: a Human Rights Nightmare*. 1992; Amnesty International. *Haiti: Human Rights Held Ransom*. August 1992; and Committee to Protect Journalists. *Bouch Pe: The Crackdown on Haiti's Media Since the Overthrow of Aristide*. September 1992.

¹¹ See: U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1992*. February 1993. pp. 421-427; Americas Watch, et al. *Haiti: The Aristide Government's Human Rights Record*. November 1, 1991.

Appendix. A Brief Statistical Profile

Area:	10,714 square miles (slightly larger than Maryland); occupies the eastern half of the island of Hispaniola
Capital:	Port-au-Prince
Population:	6.4 million
Language:	French, spoken by only 10% of the population, and Creole, spoken by the entire population.
Ethnic Groups:	About 95% of African origin and the remaining 5% of mixed African-European origin (mulatto) and European origin
Religions:	About 80% is Roman Catholic, but a majority of this group also practices Voodoo. Another 16% belong to numerous Protestant groups.
Gross National Product (GNP):	\$2.27 billion (1991)
GNP Real Growth:	-0.6% (1980-1991)
GNP Per Capita:	\$370 (1991)
Real GNP Per Capita Growth:	-2.4% (1980-1991)
Life Expectancy at Birth:	55 years (1990)
Adult Literacy:	47% (1990)
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1,000 live births):	94

Sources: Central Intelligence Agency. World Factbook 1993; World Bank. World Development Report 1993; World Bank. The World Bank Atlas, 1992.

Author Information

Maureen Taft-Morales
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.